Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER XXXIV

William Oxsheer Milam County

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THIS is the Promised Land, breathed William Oxsheer to himself as he started on his return trip from Texas to Alabama, after having spent six weeks of prospecting in Texas in 1837.

He was the eighth of twelve children and had grown up on his father's farm in Tennessee. When he was 21 years old he went to Alabama to live with his maternal uncle, William B. Wilson. Everybody was talking about the new Republic of Texas. Young William and his uncle became interested and decided to make a prospecting trip.

They entered Texas near Nacogdoches and followed the *El Camino Real*, just a mere trail at the time, to Wheelock in Robertson county. Slowly they came through the pine forests, fording the streams in the river bottoms. The vast stretch of the undulating country threaded by clear streams and running water divided almost equally between timber and prairie land was to young William Oxsheer a paradise.

He loved nature. He was fascinated by the various hues and shades of green, of the trees. The great spreading oaks, festooned with wreaths of lichen moss, the stately elms, the tall symmetrical pines under which nestled all kinds of native shrubs, and the carpets of native grass which was from four to six feet high all held his attention. The deer, raising his head with its horned coronet, then bounding gracefully away; the disdainful look of the razorback; huge flocks of wild turkeys feeding peacefully, then rising gracefully and settling on the great tree tops, calm in their security, were an increasing source of delight to young William.

"It was the hunter's home, the pioneer's paradise, and the poet's dream of breathing beauty," he told years later.

Truly, it was an earthly paradise for a man of simple taste and fond of nature. The climate was ideal with the exception of the heavy rainfall in the winter months. There was an everlasting supply of water in the Brazos and its tributaries. The land was fertile. It was a coming cattle country and an ideal farming region.

The Oxsheer family group. Of eight children only three lived to be grown. Seated are Mr. and Mrs. William Oxsheer. Left to right standing are: Viola (Mrs. H. F. Smith) Fountain, and Madora (Mrs. J. S. Flether).

William Oxsheer liked the people. They were honest, brave and frank, generous and hospitable. They were bound together by the strongest ties of friendship—that of sharing their joys and sorrows. To be sure, there were some who were rough, and probably outlaws, but these were in the minority.

He remained six weeks in and around Wheelock. Then he went back home to get ready to move to Texas. Transportation was slow in those days, and it required time to complete the transaction of even small business. So it was 1839 before he finally returned to Texas.

Came With Uncle's Family

Mr. Oxsheer and his uncle, James B. Wilson, and family came together. They were weeks on the road. As the covered wagons moved slowly toward Texas, young William's hopes mounted higher and higher. He was going into a country in the making, where a young man had opportunity of owning a home, of helping to make that country one of the greatest in the world, and he was going to be part of it.

James B. Wilson located at Wheelock, and William decided to stay with them for a while, and always felt at home there.

During that year he bought land on Little River, ten miles from Old Nashville on the Brazos River, and about the same distance from Port Sullivan, both of which were important business centers. At last, he owned fertile bottom land on which he could grow great crops of grain and later cotton. There was plenty of pasture land, beautifully wooded. Owning grazing land was not so important because there was not a fence in that section of the country.

There was an everlasting supply of water in the river. He bought a few head of cattle, branded them, and turned them loose on the open range to rustle for themselves while he devoted his time to clearing the land and starting his farming operations.

William Oxsheer had spent most of his money for land, so he had to do the work of improving it himself. While he appreciated the opportunity of doing so, he did get lonely. He loved being around people and he missed the social intercourse, so he never passed up an opportunity of visiting with his uncle's family. During one of those visits he met Martha Kirk. She had moved to Wheelock with her family from Mississippi in 1841.

They were married in 1842 and moved into the little log cabin on William's land. As soon as possible a kitchen was built, the two rooms being connected with a roof.

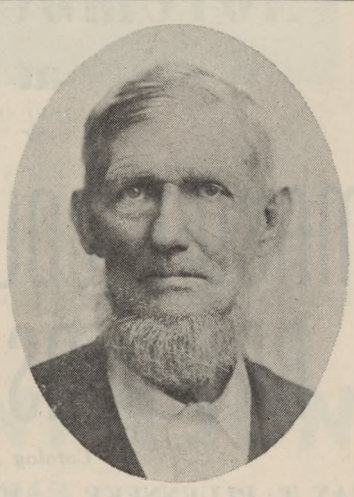
The cabin, spick and span, was Martha's pride and joy. The room with its hand made walnut bedstead, tied with ropes instead of slats, the table and a few chairs, was beautiful to her. The kitchen with its huge fireplace and meager equipment was a haven to her husband after a hard day's work. She did the cooking on the open fireplace during the first year of her marriage.

During that first year of their married life it never occurred to them that they were poor. They had no slaves as many of their neighbors had. They owned their land and their small bunch of cattle would increase each year. Young William's service as a surveyor was much in demand. The money earned from that work was a great help.

The year after their wedding, Mrs. Oxsheer's father passed away. Her mother divided the slaves among the children and moved near her daughter. The slaves were a great help to Mrs. Oxsheer in the home as well as in the field. Now that more labor was available, Mr. Oxsheer began to expand his farming operations. He grew corn and wheat. Hordes of new settlers were moving into the country, so a ready market for all the grain he could produce was assured. He began raising horses and started his flocks of sheep and goats.

As business began to flourish his first thought was to build a comfortable and

MRS. MARTHA KIRK OXSHEER
A picture taken in August, 1891



WILLIAM OXSHEER
A picture taken in August, 1891

convenient home. It would take time as the lumber would have to be brought from Houston. Sometimes, if it rained heavily, it required weeks to make the trip there and back.

They were not just building a house. They were building a home where they expected to live during their lifetime and they spent many happy hours planning to make it durable and comfortable. The outside was weatherboarded and the inside was ceiled and painted. It was underpinned with native rocks. The huge fireplaces also were built of native rocks. Eight rooms were built, four rooms on each side of a long, wide hall. One room was built several feet to the front of the hall from which a porch was built that extended clear across the front of the hall and other rooms. A room adjoining the kitchen covered the cistern and was called the "cistern house." Milk and butter were kept in troughs of water and potatoes were stored in the cellar.

Gradually it was furnished with lovely walnut furniture.

"Mammy," the cook, in her own mind, was mistress of the kitchen. She prided herself on her pone bread, baked sweet potatoes, and chicken and dumplings, all of which she cooked on the huge open fireplace until after the Civil War. There was an abundance of vegetables from the garden in season. The smokehouse was kept full of cured hams, bacon and sausage. The country was full of deer and wild turkey.

As Mr. Oxsheer continued to expand his farming and cattle operations, Mrs. Oxsheer devoted her time to the operation of her home. She personally directed all the activities. The huge pantry adjoining the dining room was filled with barrels of flour, coffee, molasses, sugar, both white and brown, and loaf sugar. Boxes of dates, candy, and tobacco could be found there also. These and other supplies were brought from Galveston in ox-drawn wagons about twice a year.

Mrs. Oxsheer trained each female slave carefully and held her responsible for the work assigned her. Some of them scoured and carded the wool. Another spun the thread and still another did the weaving. The patterns for the lovely old woolen coverlets were made by Mrs. Oxsheer. She worked out the designs for the materials to be made into dresses, and taught the slaves to dye the thread with native dyes. Still others were trained to be seamstresses. And as each child was born, a slave became its nurse maid.

The day was started by one slave lighting the fires with a flint rock. After breakfast each slave started on the work for which he was responsible. Some whistled, some sang. As Mrs. Oxsheer went about her duties she sometimes listened to the lovely old negro spirituals and sometimes "jes' nigger" songs, glad that her negroes were happy.

Respected By Neighbors

In the meantime, the citizens of that section knew they could count on William Oxsheer to help promote any worthy enterprise for the development of the community. In that section of the State, he was a substantial citizen and a leader. In 1846 when by an act of the Legislature, Burleson county was created and Cameron county shaved down to its permanent size, the county site was established at Cameron, about ten miles west of the Oxsheer home. The first officers for the new county were selected that year, and Mr. Oxsheer was elected district clerk, and served for six years.

He did not consider himself a politician, but he was glad to be of service to his adopted State. He took pride in expediting the work of his office as efficiently and economically as he did the work on his stock farm. And he continued to direct his farm activities with slave labor during that time.

His honesty and integrity were accepted by all who knew him. Two men were standing on the streets of Cameron one day. One told the other some startling news.

"Tha's a lie," declared the second one, "and I know it."

"Well, here comes William Oxsheer," replied the other. "Ask him. He told me."

"Well, if he told it, I know it is the truth," the second man acknowledged.

Mr. and Mrs. Oxsheer were staunch Methodists. When they first moved to Milam county, there were no church buildings near them. They attended the community prayer meetings, regardless of denomination. Sometimes these meetings were held in their home, sometimes in the homes of the neighbors. When the itinerant preacher came, the meetings ofttimes would be held under the shade of the trees, "God's Temples," to accommodate the larger attendance. The revival meetings conducted during the summer months when the farmers were up with their work were great occasions. People came from far and near in wagons and on horseback to attend these meetings. They were frequently held under the brush arbors built by the men in the community. And while these people

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relied daily on the sustaining spiritual strength these meetings were marked as seasons of spiritual refreshing for the elders. Many of the younger boys and girls became converted and joined the church of their choice. They listened earnestly to the preacher as he expounded the Gospel. Then everybody could join in singing the old spirituals. The slaves attended these meetings, and sat in a group near enough to hear the preaching.

The First Methodist Church at Cameron was organized in 1847. Mr. and Mrs. Oxsheer, and Mrs. Ann E. Kirk, mother of Mrs. Oxsheer, were three of the charter members. Church services were held in the courthouse in Cameron for a while, and finally a building was erected.

Sunday was a great day in the community. After attending church services, neighbors went home with each other for dinner, and visited until time to go home and do up the work. The Oxsheer home was noted for its hospitality. On Sunday afternoons frequently the men would gather in a group in the shade of the house and talk about the prospects of the crops, the price of cattle, politics and religion. The women sat in the house or on the cool porches and exchanged recipes, discussed religion, and many courtships started that later consummated in a wedding. The children had a great time playing. But they were not allowed to stray too far from the house. While the Indians did not give a great deal of trouble, the possible danger always lurked in the hearts of the parents.

Had Indian Scare

During the lull season of work the Oxsheers would sometimes spend the day with a neighbor. On one occasion, they were visiting the Wilson's, relatives of Mr. Oxsheer. Some of the Wilson slaves were grinding corn near the house. Mr. Wilson and Mr. Oxsheer were nearby when they saw the Indians coming. The men rushed into one room and the women into another. The women happened to get in the room where the guns were stored. One mulatto slave failed to get into the house. The Indians were on the warpath because a white man had killed one of their number recently. Thinking the mulatto was a white man they scalped him and got away. The men were powerless because they could not get to their guns.

There were many happy occasions, however. The Oxsheer place was located at convenient distances from Old Nashville and Port Sullivan. They did much of their shopping in Old Nashville, and Mr. Oxsheer transacted his business there.

People visited with friends for miles around as they shopped, and there they heard news from over the State. Horse races were social get-togethers for the men. Men who were not interested in the race were interested in seeing the horses because they usually had horses for sale. There, Mr. Oxsheer met many men who later become prominent in Texas history. Among these were the future distinguished Indian fighter and governor, L. S. (Sul) Ross. On that occasion, he was only a lad and a rider in one of the races.

Mrs. Oxsheer was a "homebody" and was sick much of the time, so she did not accompany Mr. Oxsheer on many trips away from home. He was always glad for her to go with him if she could.

Supplies were frequently brought up from Houston to Nashville and Cameron in ox-drawn freight wagons. Some merchandise was brought from Houston to Washington-on-the-Brazos on steamboats. Mr. Oxsheer heard that a load of merchandise for J. W. Cowan & Co., merchants at Cameron, was to be brought up the Brazos on a steamboat and then up the Little River to Cameron. The Little River flowed past one of his back fields. He immediately ordered a barrel of sugar from Houston to be unloaded on his back field. This was the first and last boat to navigate Little River. People waved to the crew as it steamed slowly past the farms and homes that fronted the river on its epochal trip. When it anchored to unload the barrel of sugar, the slaves were there to receive it. Mr. and Mrs. Oxsheer and baby Fountain were there also. They boarded the boat, and went on to Cameron and returned on it two days later.

After serving six years as district clerk, Mr. Oxsheer was glad to again devote all of his time at home. His house was just where it had been since he brought Mrs. Oxsheer there as a bride in 1842. But he no longer lived in the Republic of Texas, for Texas has been admitted to the Union.

Sometimes Mr. Oxsheer would read while Mrs. Oxsheer sat near busily knitting, their baby boy playing nearby. After supper, they would frequently sit on the big front porch while Mr. Oxsheer rested from his hard day's work. Fountain would sometimes go to sleep in his father's arms, while Mrs. Oxsheer sat nearby knitting. She could knit as easily

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in the dark as in the daylight. Public problems seemed far away.

He was glad to be home again; glad he could devote all of his time to expanding his farming interests and the cattle industry. His horses, cattle, sheep and goats, grazing on the open range had increased to considerable size. He would have a goodly number of cattle and horses to sell to the drovers who came to the country regularly to buy them. There was plenty of wool which the slaves scoured, carded, spun and wove into cloth for home use.

Mr. Oxsheer set about expanding his farm activities. He bought more land, and with slave labor he cleared more new ground. Many of the logs were used to build additional slave quarters. Cotton was becoming a bigger cash crop each year. Even though the price was low, it did not cost much to produce. He had plenty of slaves and was one among the first to recognize the growing importance of the cotton industry. He decided to increase his acreage of grain crops in order to have sufficient feed for his work stock. He would plant the greater part of his new ground in cotton.

Separating the lint from the seed by hand was too slow for commercial profit, so he built one of the first gins in the country. It was operated by mule power and slave labor. He could gin two bales a day, which was lightning speed as compared to the hand method of separating the seed.

Mr. Oxsheer injured his hand in the gin machinery and never fully recovered the use of it. Thereafter Mrs. Oxsheer kept a close watch on her children during the ginning season, and kept them away from the gin as much as possible. She did not have much trouble with Fountain. If he could get on a horse and see after the cattle he was happy.

Educated the Children

Meantime, the children were growing up. Mr. and Mrs. Oxsheer were eager for them to receive the best educational opportunities available. They employed a man to stay in the home and teach them, but it was not satisfactory. They were sent to school at different times to Cameron, Port Sullivan, and later to Salado College.

The Oxsheers were happy and prosper-out when the Civil War was declared. Fountain, of course, was too young to enlist, and Mr. Oxsheer did not go because of his injured hand, but he did what he could do as a citizen. Finally the war was over, and the slaves were free. William Oxsheer called his slaves together, as he had done many times before, but he and the slaves knew this call was different from any of the previous ones. "You are all free," he said, "You can do as you please."

There was a slight pause, then one old negro stepped forward and spoke for them.

"Marse William, we're gwine ter stay with you."

Some of them were crying. "My family will all be scattered," moaned one negro mammy, "and den what will become uv 'em?"

Many of the slaves did continue to work for the Oxsheers.

The homestead still belongs to the oldest daughter, Viola, now Mrs. H. F. Smith of Cameron. Some of the negroes living on the old farm today are descendants of the slaves of the William Oxsheer family.

Viola, the oldest daughter, saw her first cook stove soon after the close of the Civil War. A lady with whom she was boarding and going to school had one. She was a natural housekeeper and homemaker. She thought it was the greatest home convenience she had ever seen, so she persuaded her family to buy one immediately.

Mrs. Oxsheer was ill when the stove was brought home, so Viola had the responsibility of teaching "mammy," the cook, how to use it. She would not have anything to do with it at first.

"Law, if I'd know'd I could cook on one uv dem things, I'd let Miss Martha (Mrs. Oxsheer) buy one long time ago," she exclaimed when she realized she could cook on it.

There were eight children, but only Fountain, Viola and Madora lived to be grown and married.

Mr. Oxsheer and Fountain were busy directing the farming operations and the cattle industry. Fountain was a cattleman and not a farmer.

Mr. Oxsheer was so happy at home, but his friends thought he was needed in the State Legislature. It was hard for him to refuse to do anything if he thought he could render a service, and now, he did not like to be away from home because of Mrs. Oxsheer's ill health. But he did serve three terms in the Legislature, and he was glad he had the privilege of helping to inaugurate as governor his friend, Jim Hogg.

He served his last term as a member of the 17th Legislature, and then came home to stay. Mr. and Mrs. Oxsheer had always looked forward to spending their last days together, comfortably and happy, in the place that had been "home" to them since they first started housekeeping. Now they enjoyed talking over their early life together. They were glad they had lived in Texas under three flags, and that they had had an opportunity of contributing to its growth and development.

Their children were happily established in homes of their own. Fountain had married Mary Beal. They were living "out West" where he had become a real cattleman. Viola had married H. F. Smith, a banker in Cameron, and Madora married Dr. J. S. Flether and was living in Dallas.

Mr. and Mrs. Oxsheer celebrated their fiftieth anniversary in the same home where they started housekeeping. Their numerous friends and relatives who called went away with a feeling that they had truly grown old together in a most affectionate and beautiful way.

Mrs. Oxsheer passed away in 1893. Mr. Oxsheer joined her twelve years later.

The children now living are Mrs. H. F. Smith, Cameron, and Mrs. J. S. Flether, Dallas.

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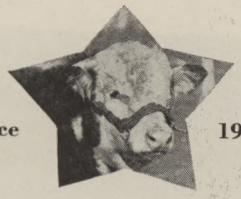

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